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THE "HEIDE PARK" OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE AD-  
VANCEMENT OF THE COMMON WEAL  
IN DRESDEN

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Dresden, the capital of the Kingdom of Saxony, is everywhere recognized as one of the prettiest cities of Europe. After the Elbe leaves Saxon, Switzerland, it flows through a broad, fertile valley in which the city of Dresden is situated. To the south are the gentle slopes of the Erzgebirge and to the north a rather steep ridge of hills, the last outliers of the diluvial glacial moraines. Of all the gardens and parks for which Dresden is famous, the "Grosser Garten" is rightly regarded as the most beautiful park in Germany. Nor must we neglect mentioning the art treasures to be found here. The most valuable adornment of the city is its extensive pine forests, which spread out over the above-mentioned ridge of hills in a northerly direction. The name given to this sandy strip of forest, which, by the way, does not extend as far as the city, has from time immemorial been the "Dresdener Heide," the Dresden pine forest. Not far from the well-known health resort, "Der weisse Hirsch," the white stag, and only a short distance from the city, the "Heide Park," forest park, of the "Verein Volkswohl" was established.

This Dresden Society is the result of the battle against alcoholism. The founders of the society started out on the principle that it was not enough to adopt rigorous measures against the misuse of spiritous liquors, but that it was just as important, probably more so, to remove the causes leading to alcoholism. The cause of this tendency to drink was found to lie principally in the sociability and conviviality of the masses. Therefore the society made the reform of the amusements of the people, particularly among the less well-to-do classes, its especial aim. To accomplish this end they established reform hotels in every part of the city. Here the patrons were not expected to spend money for liquor, and reading rooms and clubrooms were established for the guests.

These hotels have not only stood the test of time, but they are a paying investment. It was discovered very early that in order to be successful in their undertaking, it was necessary to include the younger generation in the general plan, for hale buoyancy of youth cannot fully develop in the narrow confines of a large city. To get these boys and girls, whose growth was stunted by their city life, back to nature was the problem which this society tried to solve.

The organizer of this new form of sociability was Judge Carl Böhmert, a man of high ideals in education. Shortly before his death, in 1898, he gave expression to his ideas on this subject in a short monograph. According to his plan, the little children were to be taken in charge, reared in the forest and thus gradually to grow up to manhood and womanhood thoroughly imbued with his ideas on the conviviality of life. On this basis he developed his "Knaben- und Mädchenwehren," boys' brigades and girls' brigades, his nature theater and many other regulations. Unfortunately, Judge Böhmert's early death prevented a realization of these plans, and there was no one to take his place. The "Kinderfahrten," the outings for children, were his work and they have survived him, and have become the model for numerous similar undertakings in other cities. This, then, is the reason for a more detailed presentation of his plan here.

In 1893 the Saxon government, which owned the aforesaid forest, gave the society six hectares (14.83 acres) of land as a playground for the children. It was decided to take a number of "fresh-air" children, *i. e.*, children who needed fresh air and recreation, of the poorer classes by street cars to "Waldschloesschen," the terminus of the car line and from there to walk to the forest reservation. At that time they still used horse cars. A hundred children could be taken on one trip, and for this the society paid 72 cents. The expenses of these trips were defrayed by popular subscription. The society estimated that one hundred children would present themselves for this outing. On the first day there were two hundred children, the second day four hundred, and soon from a thousand to twelve hundred. Dresden had, at that time, a population of 300,000. The society had never expected or anticipated such crowds of children and, therefore, they decided to limit the number of children to the children of members of the

society. In order to make membership possible for even the poorest, the membership fee was fixed at 12 cents for three months. In a short time the membership increased from 3000 to 5000, and the majority of members belonged to the poorer classes. Many took membership only for the summer months. Special arrangements were necessary to gather the children from the heart of the city and then to bring them back again. The parents could not accompany them on account of work or domestic duties. Therefore they took the children to the cars in the morning and met them there in the evening. When trolley cars supplanted the old horse cars, the society had to make different arrangements, because the trolley cars were too small. They, therefore, resolved to charter a boat, which took them to within a fifteen-minute walk of their destination. The children now gather on the banks of the Elbe, where a boat is in waiting, and here the parents meet the children in the evening. As has been said before, children can not go on these outings unless their parents are members of this society. Each member receives a membership card on which the names of parents and children and also their address are written. The regulations governing these outings are also printed on these cards. With these membership cards in their possession the children assemble on the afternoon before the following day's outing and receive their tickets, which are good for one trip only, and are of different color for each trip. The number of the district to which it belongs is also printed on the ticket. Such a ticket reads: "Society of the Commonweal, Dresden. This ticket entitles bearer to one trip to the pine forest. District 6. Boat leaves wharf: Dresden, 1.50 P. M.; Johannesstadt, 2.05 P.M. (During vacation, 20 minutes earlier.) Pin this ticket on your person so that it can be seen by everybody." Most children wear the ticket suspended on a ribbon hanging about the neck. As a rule, children may choose the district from which they wish to come. Furthermore, the children of each district are kept together as much as possible. There are 12 districts and 150 to 200 tickets are distributed in each district. The children range in age from 3 to 16 years. The number of children between 3 and 5 years old is very large. On the boat 12 older boys are given banners fastened to poles, and on these banners is the number of each district. As soon as the boat arrives at its destination, these 12 boys hasten on ahead and plant these banners in their respective places. The chil-

dren then disembark in order and stand behind the boy to whose district they belong. After they have all gathered under their respective banners they march in solid column to the forest, where the boys again take the stations assigned to them. The officials of the society, the lady teachers appointed by the society to oversee the games, and other young ladies accompany the children. In addition, there is in each division a number of boys and girls who have to attend to the good order of each division, and particularly to care for the little children. The return trip is regulated in exactly the same way.

On the average, 1600 children attend each outing. To these must be added hundreds of others who live nearby and come to the forest on foot, and acquaintances who accompany them on the boat or the trolley cars. Many private individuals and other societies send children of poor parents at their own expense, and thus there are frequently more than 2000 children in the forest at one time. There are about 25 outings during the year, from the middle of May to August. During the school year these excursions are held on Wednesday and Saturday, and during vacation on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. In 1905, 30,254 children were taken to the park and 32,383 from the park. Not a single child has ever been lost, such has been the extraordinarily careful supervision. The society pays the boat company 1.68 cents a head. The supervision of these children is in the hands of the officers of the society, one sanitary inspector, ten paid women as aids and three paid seminarians, young people from the normal school. The women aids receive for their afternoon's work 48 cents, the seminarians 36 cents. In addition there are many other women who accompany these outings, but who offer their services gratis, their only motive being their love for the children. One or two aids are assigned to each division. The boys of all the divisions are under the supervision of an experienced male teacher while they are playing on the playground.

This supervision is perfected furthermore by the boys and girls who are picked by the society to act as guards, and who are taken from the higher classes in school.

Each such boy has a tin shield and each girl wears a red band on her arm with the number of the division on it. The children take great pride in this mark of distinction. In this way

a fine *esprit de corps* has been formed and serves as a bond between the children after they have grown up. The society nurtures this spirit as much as possible and arranges special trips during the year, giving them a plot of ground in which to lay out a garden, etc. Each of the boys and girls who serve as guards has also a special position as attendant in the kitchen, at play, at exercise, or at books; the girls as nursemaids, attending to the sewing and to the playing. Again, the most capable of the boys are picked out and they serve as sanitary inspectors and are given special instruction. The 15 acres which were originally given by the state are divided into 12 sections, one for each of the 12 districts of the city. In addition, the society leased 56.8 acres more of the forest, which are used as playground. A large building has also been erected on it. In each section of the original grant there is a log hut. The provisions brought by the children, as well as wraps, umbrellas, etc., are kept in these log huts. These houses also serve as a protection in case of showers. After the children have surrendered their milk checks, which they buy at 1¼ cents each, they go to the various sections of the park. The smallest children play in sand heaps, under the supervision of the girls before mentioned, the rest of them play all sorts of games and take exercise of all kinds under the direction of the girl aids. The larger boys and girls are under the eye of the teacher and they go through their gymnastic drills. Still others gather in smaller groups, build castles of sand, etc. The patrons of the society have donated all sorts of playthings. The officials of the society make it a point to see that none of the children lose themselves in the woods. In addition the entire park is enclosed in lattice work. Between four o'clock and five o'clock there is a general rest. Then an official informs the boat company by telephone how many children are to be taken home in the evening. Then they estimate how much milk will be needed, and when the children get there the milk wagon is already there. The larger boys appointed as guards collect the milk checks, give them to the milkman, who then hands out the milk in glasses in trays and the boys distribute them to their charges. In the meantime the children have seated themselves in their respective sections, having spread out their lunch, other boys collect the money for wheat bread, which is likewise given out at the same place as the milk. Some of the children bring with them bottles containing milk or coffee. Drink-

ing beer is prohibited. The glasses used are broken beer bottles, the broken edges of which were ground down at the glass works. These are very desirable and stand the test very well. After using, these glasses are washed in water containing sodium carbonate, rinsed and put on trays, and then put away until next time. Everything is done in a simple and practical way. The expenses are small and are more than covered by the income of the hotel (*wirtschaft*) of the park. It is obvious that these children become fond of this park and continue to visit it. Thus the park has become the chief meeting place of the city, and many parents go there so as to be near their children.

The society, as has been remarked before, fosters the care of children even after these children have grown up. The society assigned to the boys who were guards the care of the schoolyard in the park and these boys attend to the garden under proper supervision. The boys make trips frequently to the park at other times also. Furthermore, Judge Böhmert kept the boys of the guard throughout the rest of the year by arranging for them regular lessons in reading and elocution, by which they were prepared for the productions in the "Naturtheater." It turned out, however, that these productions in the theater drew the boys too much away from school, and they were given up later on. Now the boys meet twice a week, beginning in spring to work in the schoolgarden in the park, and at the same time are taught how to do things when the outings begin in May. The girls' guard also still assembles regularly from October to May on Wednesday afternoon from four to six to learn how to knit and sew, and how to do other work, and they also mend the towels and fix the utensils. While doing this instructive stories are read to them. The girls also learn games, especially charades, which stand them in good stead when the outings begin. At Christmas these boys and girls of the guard have a special vacation. The society bases its hopes on these boys and girls as much as it does on those who take part in these outings. Will they again find pleasure in these pastimes after they have once learned to know genuine pleasure in the sociability of the open air? The society hopes to build up through these boys and girls a better social atmosphere, expecting them to be pioneers in a good cause. This was the intention of the founder of the society. In this they have already partially succeeded. Some of them have already

grown up and they and their wives form the nuclei of the happy life which unfolds in summertime in this park of the masses. They are also colaborers in the cause for which the society stands, their children go on these outings and a new generation is already making itself felt.

The "Naturtheater" is also an important arrangement. On one side of the forest there is a loghouse, with a stage, and a square in front of it. In front of this house rude benches are erected, which reach up the gently sloping side of the valley. So there is room here for 2000 persons. The acoustics are excellent. In this theater popular plays are frequently given, usually on Sunday, but sometimes also on Wednesday afternoon. Originally these plays were arranged by the boys of the guard, but this was given up later on for pedagogical reasons. Now it is the young people who win their first laurels on the stage of this open-air theater (Naturtheater). Among these there are many former members of the boys' and girls' guard. The plays given are planned to serve as an introduction to the drama, but at the same time serve as a form of entertainment for those who visit the park. Admission fees are charged, 5 cents for members of the society, 2½ cents for children and 7½ cents for non-members. Since 1904 dramatic societies have given productions there, as have also professional actors. The sense and feeling for art, simple and yet true to life, is to be rescued through these attempts. Unfortunately, there is still a great lack of proper material. "Wallenstein's Lager" and Schiller's "Wilhelm Tell" were given with great applause. An opera, "Preciosa," was also successfully rendered. Thus the much-ridiculed open-air theater has been successful after all, it has been more than this, it left a balance in the treasury of the society. For several years past this open-air theater has been used also for song recitals by children. Choirs from the schools sing their jolly songs here, old as well as new, and the fond parents of the performers, as also the members, listen attentively to the efforts of their children. Since 1905 religious services have been also held in the park, and on May 23d, of that year, more than 2000 persons listened devoutly to a stirring sermon.

In conclusion, it should be noted that at the present time many public festivals are also held here. The large playground, the open-air theatre and the spacious house of the society are admirably



adapted to these festivals. It is true, bottled near-beer is sold in the building, but every other spiritous liquor is forbidden, and the majority of the people have accustomed themselves not to drink any intoxicating liquors. So we can see a new spirit gradually getting a foothold in the national consciousness. On August 23, 1909, the eightieth birthday of the founder of the society, one of the prettiest celebrations, was held here. On this occasion more than 4000 children gathered in festal array on the playground and did homage to the founder of the society.

Thus the forest park of the Society for the Commonweal in Dresden represents a grand and successful experiment to organize the recreation of the children of the masses on a firm, cheerful basis and to reform popular amusements as a whole. In 1906, the society published a well-illustrated report of its work, under the title: *Volkswohfahrt und Volksgeselligkeit nach den Erfahrungen des Dresdner Vereins Volkswohl*. This was published by A. V. Böhmert, Dresden.